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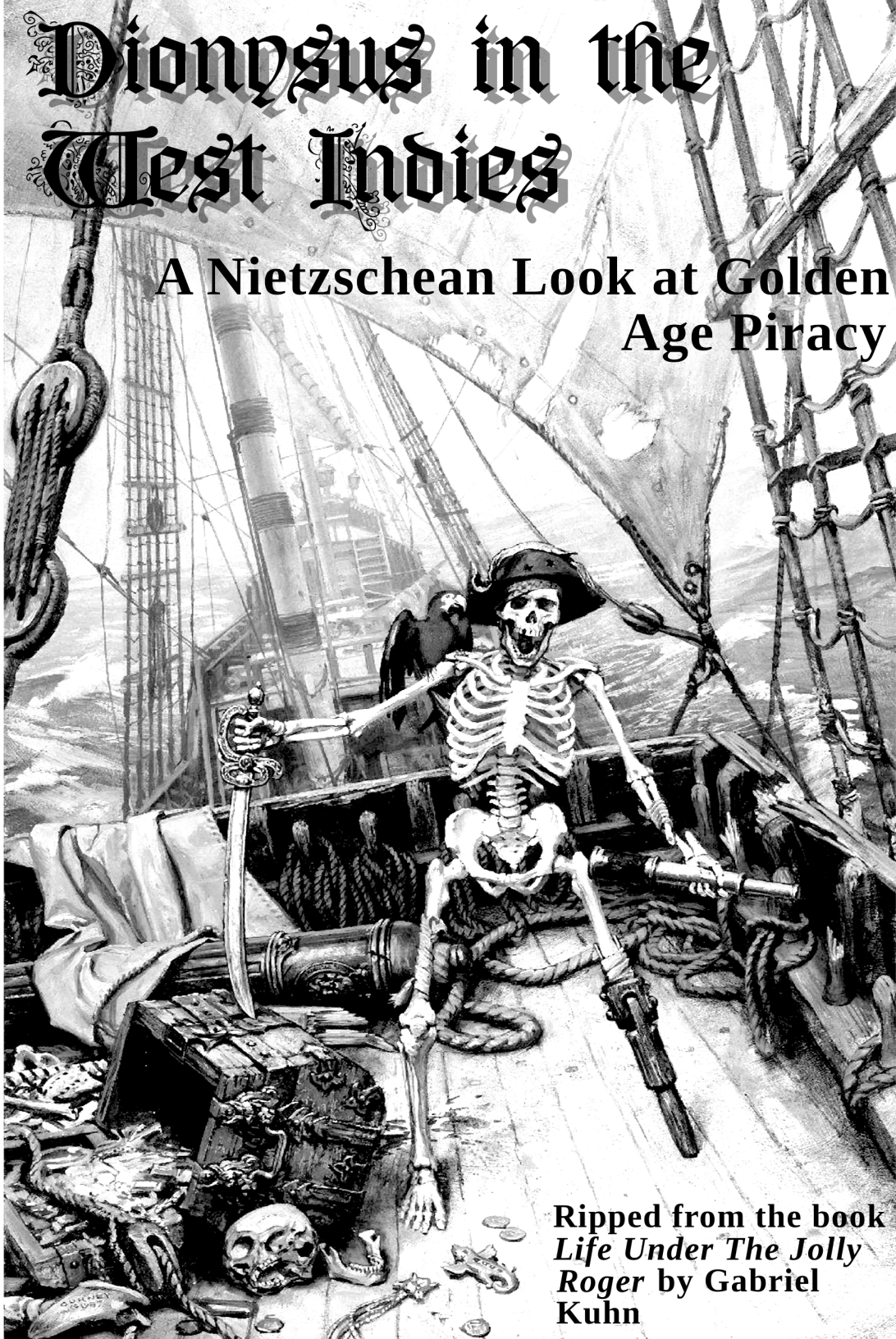
Dionysus in the West Indies

A Nietzschean Look at Golden Age Piracy



Ripped from the book *Life Under The Jolly Roger* by Gabriel Kuhn

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means—be it that they call him a disease or a degenerated being, be it that they suggest him living in hell, a sort of earthly purgatory. But why? To defend the 'temperate zones'?

The political ambiguities that we have encountered throughout this book can- not be resolved by arguments over the 'right' interpretations. This will only lead us into ideological dead-ends. The said ambiguities can only be resolved by adaptation instead. It is too late for both Nietzsche and the golden age pirates to do this. It is not too late for us.

While it is difficult to define golden age piracy politically, the possibilities for radical adaptations remain wide open, since at the core of golden age pirate life lies an unrestrained existential vitality, or, in Nietzsche's terms, a Dionysian philosophy—an incredibly strong and powerful anti-authoritarian and liberatory force that knows no restriction by social considerations, ethical principles, or political ideals. It is a force that can therefore turn into anything: an ally in the fight for freedom or justice, or a dreadful fascist enemy.

Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, ecstasy, festivity, and, according to some, "inspired madness," plays a principal role in Nietzsche's philosophy since his first published work, The Birth of Tragedy (1872). In this essay, Nietzsche analyzes Greek tragedy as an art that blends both "Apollonian" and "Dionysian" elements—the later often being neglected in our lives and finally totally abandoned by the "Socratian tendency." Nietzsche, however, urges us to "believe in the Dionysian life" and, to his last texts, declares himself the defender of the "Dionysian spell." In one of his best known works, Beyond Good and Evil (1886), he calls himself "the last disciple and initiate of the god Dionysus." So what does the Dionysian moment stand for?

It is, according to Nietzsche, "a fundamental counter-doctrine and counter-evaluation of life, purely artistic, purely anti-Christian." Its

desires are characterized by “initiative, audacity, revenge, cleverness, rapacity, lust for power,” its values by “a vigorous physicality, a blooming, rich, abundant health, and by everything this depends on: war, adventure, hunting, dance, fighting, and everything that implies strong, free, joyful activity.” In the words of Gilles Deleuze, arguably the most sophisticated representative of what has been dubbed a lef Nietzscheanism, “it is Dionysus’ task to make us graceful, to teach us to dance, to give us the instinct of play.”

It would be wrong to suggest that golden age pirates represented a Dionysian community in Nietzsche’s eyes. Given his cultural elitism, Nietzsche would have probably seen the festive excesses of pirate crews as the expression of a “grotesque and vulgar” Dionysianism which he criticizes in the Birth of Tragedy. Nonetheless, disregarding Nietzsche’s own possible objections, it is certainly revealing to analyze the golden age pirates’ social experiment from a Dionysian perspective.

Affirmation

“Dionysian art wants to persuade us of the eternal joy of being,” writes Nietzsche in The Birth of Tragedy, and this “affirmation of life,” “the Dionysian yes” remains a crucial theme throughout his work. Against the perceived “decadence” and “nihilism” of his era, Nietzsche uses the figure of Dionysus to champion an uncompromising embrace of life in all its dimensions, not inhibited by bourgeois values and limitations. Dionysus “is the god for whom life does not have to be justified, for whom life is essentially just.”

Golden age pirates seem to have shared this sentiment. Philip Gosse relates that Captain William Jennings explained that he was a pirate

many more) who joined the pirates, drink was more important than the wealth that he might gain,” Frank Sherry writes that “it was the freedom to drink as much and as often as he liked that the ordinary sea outlaw prized above all others.” Indeed, while Exquemelin suggests that the buccaneers drink brandy “as liberally as the Spaniards do clear fountain water,” Captain Johnson relates that “nay, sobriety brought a man under a suspicion of being in a plot against the commonwealth, and in their sense, he was looked upon to be villain that would not be drunk.” Another entertaining passage from the General History confirms the esteem that alcohol was held in by the pirates: When planters from Mauritius visited a food-poisoned pirate crew aboard their ship, “they advised their drinking plentifully of strong liquors, which was the only way to expel the poison… [The pirates] readily followed this advice, as the prescription was agreeable.”

Nietzsche would have probably not approved of the golden age pirates’ drinking orgies. In fact, in The Dawn he criticizes those who “perceive intoxication as their true life, as their actual self” and who believe in “intoxication as the life within life.” Nonetheless, he declares in The Birth of Tragedy that “the essence of the Dionysian principle becomes most comprehensible for us through the analogy of intoxication.”

Maybe the West Indies really were a welcoming place for Friedrich Nietzsche—or, in any case, for the god of wine, Dionysus. In the Genealogy of Morals Nietzsche writes:

> *It seems like the moralists hate the jungle and the tropics; it seems that they have to discredit the ‘tropical human’ by all*

> *overwhelming charades of reason and ruin. The most noble caste was originally always the barbarian caste: their dominance was not primarily physical but spiritual—they were more complete human beings.*

Gilles Deleuze ties the meaning of destruction to the Dionysian moment in Nietzsche's thought:

> *Destruction becomes active to the extent that the negative is transmuted and converted into affirmative power: the 'eternal joy of becoming' which is avowed in an instant, the 'joy of annihilation,' the 'affirmation of annihilation and destruction'…This is the 'decisive point' of Dionysian philosophy: the point at which negation expresses an affirmation of life, destroys reactive forces and restores the rights of activity. The negative becomes the thunderbolt and lightning of a power of affirming.*

It is not surprising then that Nietzsche states that "the active, atacking, importunate human is in any case a hundred steps closer to justice than the reactive," and that he would praise a "justice of punishment," reminiscent of the core of the golden age pirates' ethics.

Intoxication

Dionysus being the god of wine and, in Nietzsche's words, the "artist of intoxication," it seems impossible not to mention the significance of drink within the pirate community. Stephen Snelders contents himself to point out that "alcohol was a binding element among the pirates." Other commentators, however, are more bold: while Marcus Rediker suggests that "for one man (and probably a great "for the love of the life," while one George Bendall is quoted by Peter Earle as saying that "he wished he had begun the life sooner for he thought it was a very pleasant one, meaning the piratical way.'" In the same vein, Captain Johnson tells us of two pirates, Phineas Bunce and Dennis Macarty, who, soon after they had accepted a royal pardon, "began to ratle and talk with great pleasure and much boasting of their former exploits when they had been pirates, crying up a pirate's life to be the only life for a man of spirit."

All this seems to confirm Stephen Snelders conclusion that buccaneering "was not simply a way to make a living, but a way of life." A decisive factor—confirming the affirmation so important in Nietzsche's thought—is that the lives of the buccaneers and pirates were created by themselves; they had seized their lives by their own motivation and activity. Nietzsche would have rejoiced at the observation of Marcus Rediker that the pirate Walter Kennedy "like the others, was not merely escaping oppressive circumstances. He was escaping to something new, a different reality… "

Liberty

Nietzsche writes in The Gay Science:

> *Indeed, we philosophers and 'free spirits' feel as if a new dawn shines on us when we hear that the 'old God is dead;' our heart overflows with gratitude, awe, intuition, expectation—finally, the horizon is free again… and we can finally board our ships and sail into whatever danger we will encounter. Those eager to know can be daring again;*

the sea, our sea, has been opened once more; in fact, maybe there has never been a sea that 'open'!

"There is another world to discover—and more than just one! Onto the ships, philosophers!"

The allegories might be random, but the notion of liberty associated with them echoes those of the golden age pirates. Various authors concur that the thirst for liberty was a decisive factor in motivating seamen to go on the account.

Peter Lamborn Wilson writes that "looking at the whole picture, rather than individual careers, we get the impression that desire for total liberty constituted perhaps the deepest motive for classical piracy;" for Stephen Snelders the pirates were "maximizing the liberty of seamen;" Frank Sherry calls "the chance that piracy offered to ordinary sailors to live as free men [piracy's] real lure;" Chris Land believes that "for many pirates the self conscious pursuit of liberty and autonomy became the main reason for their choice of life;" and Marcus Rediker observes that "in the popular mind, the pirate was not 'the common enemy of mankind' but rather the freest of mankind." Nietzsche adds an important distinction when he compares "free-thinkers" to "free-doers": "The free-doers are at a disadvantage to the free-thinkers, since action makes humans suffer much more than thought."

Defiance

The notion of liberty combined with Nietzsche's demand for a "transvaluation of values" (the creation of new, self-determined moralities) and a "twilight of the idols" (the rejection of everything we are taught to revere) corresponds markedly to the golden age

According to Marcus Rediker, "indeed, many crews pledged to each other that 'They would blow up rather than be taken.'"

Together with their defiance of death, many pirates seemed to forsake heaven too. William Snelgrave reports that members of pirate captain Tomas Cocklyn's crew affirmed that they were on a "voyage to hell." Once again, it is a quote from Captain Johnson's General History that sums up the sentiment best. When To. Suton, one of the captured pirates of Bartholomew Roberts' crew, asks a fellow praying prisoner, "What he proposed by so much noise and devotion," and receives, "Heaven, I hope," as an answer, he declares: "Heaven, you fool…Did you ever hear of any pirates going thither? Give me h-ll, it's a merrier place; I'll give Roberts a salute of 13 guns at entrance."

Destruction

The associations between golden age piracy, raiding, and cruelty pose no problem in the context of Nietzsche's philosophy. In fact, Nietzsche sees direct links between destructive activity and existential advance. An often quoted passage from Beyond Good and Evil inevitably reminds of the golden age pirates' endeavors:

Let us clarify without reservations how each higher form of culture began that the earth has known: Men who were still in touch with their natural selves, barbarians in each terrible sense of the word, raiders who still had unconstrained will and a desire for power, atacked weaker, more civilized, more peaceful races—maybe traders or pastoralists representing old and weary cultures in which the last glimpses of life have disappeared behind the

famed pirate captain Bartholomew Roberts: "'In an honest service,' says he, 'there is thin commons, low wages, and hard labour; in this, plenty and satiety, pleasure and ease, liberty and power; and who would not balance creditor on this side, when all the hazard that is run for it, at worst is only a sour look or two at choking. No, a merry life and a short one, shall be my moto.'" Indifference towards the likely prospect of death was also a main feature of many variations of the Jolly Roger: "Some records of pirate flags show dancing skeletons, meaning dancing a jig with death, synonymously playing with death, or not caring about fate. This was also the symbolism behind raised drinking glasses, the image referring to a toast to death in store—those flying this flag didn't care about their fate." Marcus Rediker suggests that "a defiance of death" was not only the meaning of the pirate flag, but perhaps "of piracy altogether." In another famous quote related by Johnson, Mary Read says "that as to hanging, she thought it no great hardship, for were it not for that, every cowardly fellow would turn pirate, and so infest the seas that men of courage must starve."

Even if hanging was thus accepted as deterrence, it is only fiting that many pirates, in their self-determined ways, were set on denying the authorities the gratification of executing them even when they were ready to die. Men of Bartholomew Roberts' crew allegedly told passengers on one of the vessels they took that they would not "go to Hope Point to be hanged a-sun-drying," but that, "if it should chance that they should be atacked by any superiour power or force, which they could not master, they would immediately put fire with one of their pistols to their powder, and go all merrily to hell together!"

pirates' anti-authoritarianism: "Pirates constructed a culture of masterless men. They were as far removed from the traditional authority as any men could be in the early eighteenth century. Beyond the church, beyond the family, beyond disciplinary labor, and using the sea to distance themselves from the powers of the state, they carried out a strange experiment." "Indeed, there was 'so litle Government and Subordination' among pirates that 'they are, on Occasion, all Captains, all Leaders.'"

Self-Determination

In direct relation to the above, Nietzsche declares: "It is only for the few to be independent—it is only for those who are strong. Those who assert their independence—with every right but without being forced—prove that they are not only strong but fearless and audacious. They leap into a labyrinth and multiply the dangers of life by a thousand."

This sense of independence, or, as we might more aptly say, self-determination, is echoed in a number of depictions of the golden age pirates' life. In order to illustrate what he conceives as a "kind of proto-individualist-anarchist atitude," Peter Lamborn Wilson relates the following anecdote: "At one time, Eston was told that James I of England had offered him a pardon. 'Why should I obey a king's orders,' he asked, 'when I am a kind of king myself '?"

Marcus Rediker elaborates on the imagery: "Perhaps this illuminates Daniel Defoe's description of pirates, where every man was 'in his own Imagination a Captain, a Prince, or a King.' Such positions of authority may not have been so bad as long as everyone could claim a title." Accordingly, the traditional authorities were regarded with

litle respect. Bartholomew Roberts' crew allegedly told the captain of the raided merchantman Samuel: "We shall accept no Act of Grace, may the King and Parliament be damned with their Act of Grace for us… " Rediker deduces that "the pirate was someone with whom 'no Faith, Promise, nor Oath is to be observed.'" Stephen Snelders, pondering on why we enjoy the pirates' stories despite the early "moral judgment" they received, comes to the conclusion that it is "because a pirate takes his life in his own hands." Claes G. Compaen, for example, a Dutch buccaneer portrayed by Snelders, "played his own game. And for three years he got away with it, which is much longer than most of us will ever even try."

Paraphrasing the Situationists' "Teses on the Paris Commune," Snelders later notes that "the pirates had become masters of their own history, not so much on the level of 'governmental' politics as on the level of their everyday life." Finally, it is worth quoting once more the famous outburst that Captain Johnson ascribes to Saul Bellamy, directed at the captain of a recently taken merchantman after his refusal to join Bellamy's crew:

> *You are a devilish conscientious rascal, d-n ye, replied Bellamy. I am a fee prince, and I have as much authority to make war on the whole world as he who has a hundred sail of ships at sea, and an army of 100,000 men in the field, and this my conscience tells me. But there is no arguing with such snivelling puppies, who allow superiors to kick them about deck at pleasure and pin their faith upon a pimp of a parson, a squab, who neither practices not believes what he puts upon the chuckle-headed fools he preaches to.*

again: He who never lives at the right time, how shall he die at the right time?"

The lives of many golden age pirates seemed to reflect this sentiment. The possibility of death was always near—and became a reality for many. Marcus Rediker relates that "premature death was… the pirate's lot" and that "at least one in four died or was killed." In an entry in The Pirates' Who's Who, Philip Gosse mentions that one Tomas Hazel, hanged at the age of 50, "is one of the longest lived pirates we have been able to hear of."

Still, the possibility of death seemed to be no deterrent for most pirates to pursue their trade. There are probably some psycho-sociological explanations for this, like the one by David Cordingly: "Despite the great risk of being captured and executed for your deeds, piracy was an atractive alternative to dying of starvation, becoming a beggar or thief on land, or serving in appalling conditions on a ship with no chance of substantial financial reward."This is confirmed by one Robert Sparks, seaman of the Abington, who is quoted by Marcus Rediker as saying "that their ship 'would make a good Pirate Ship, for,' he insisted, 'they had beter be dead than live in Misery.'" This conviction even translated into belitling the prospects of execution: "As more and more pirates were hanged, and as the likelihood of death for anyone who went 'upon the account' increased, pirates responded by intensifying their commitment to each other, 'one and all.' And they did so with a laugh."

The golden age pirates' atitude towards death (and life) was most famously captured in a quote that Captain Johnson ascribes to the

the buccaneers and pirates depicted by Peter Lamborn Wilson would have met with a rejection of the subject that should have post-structuralist theorists rejoice with delight, and that, in any case, reminds us of Nietzsche's assertion that "the ban of individuation is shatered by Dionysus' jubilant howl."

Fear

Nietzsche never denies that a life of insecurity and chance does include cruelty and fear. In fact, it is a crucial aspect of his philosophy that he demands these aspects of life to be embraced as part of embracing life itself.

In The Gay Science, Nietzsche defines being heroic as "simultaneously heading towards one's most severe suffering and one's highest hopes." In simple words: it is worth being afraid if this means that we can live exciting lives, and no life can be exciting without danger; fear then simply becomes the inevitable supplement. In the words of Gilles Deleuze: "'Those who affirm the superabundance of life' make suffering an affirmation in the same way as they make intoxication an activity." Nietzsche himself states: "Who would not prefer to fear when he can admire at the same time; rather than not fear but be condemned to watch ill-bred, weakened, degenerated, poisoned men only?…We suffer of man, there is no doubt. But not because we fear him. Rather because there is nothing in him to fear anymore. He has turned into a worm."

Death

Nietzsche not only embraces fear as a part of life, but death as well. In Thus Spoke Zarathustra, he notes: "Many die too late, and some die too early.…Die at the right time! Thus spoke Zarathustra. Then

Merit

The notions of liberty, defiance and self-determination imply another defining aspect of golden age pirate life, namely the possibility for individuals to find a place within the community based on merit alone. While Robert C. Ritchie remarks on Captain Every that "like so many of the pirates, his life is a blank until he emerged from the ranks of faceless sailors to captain a pirate ship," Stephen Snelders writes with respect to Jan Erasmus Reyning, that "his life is an example of how the Brotherhood could take a sailor with no prospects and offer him new opportunities, roving on the account in a life that was continuously adventurous and dangerous."

According to Maurice Besson, in the world of the Caribbean buccaneers and pirates, "courage alone conferred distinction." A notion that echoes all of Nietzsche's ideals of the masters—an aristocracy not defined by birth but by standing the test of life itself.

Festival

Being the god of wine, Dionysus is inextricably linked to festival and celebration. Nietzsche speaks of "Dionysian delights," "the ecstatic aspects of the Dionysian festival," "the Dionysian celebration." Deleuze evokes the "trinity of dance, play and laughter." It seems apt that Stephen Snelders would call a book chapter dedicated to the buccaneer and pirate lifestyle "Joie de Vivre: An Eternal Festival." The authors of "Pirate Utopias" comment casually: "The pirates certainly seem to have had more fun than their poor suffering counterparts on naval or merchant vessels. Tey sure had some pretty wild parties."

According to Marcus Rediker, the pirates “made merry. Indeed, ‘merry’ is the word most commonly used to describe the mood and spirit of life aboard the pirate ship.” Rediker further explains: “Not surprisingly, many observers of pirate life noted the carnivalesque quality of pirate occasions—the eating, drinking, fiddling, dancing, and merriment—and some considered such ‘infinite Disorders’ inimical to good discipline at sea.” The special role of the musicians on pirate ships ought not surprise then. According to Frank Sherry, they were “by far the most popular members of any pirate crew… , men who could coax a song out of a pipe or a horn, and who were often excused from the most onerous duties in recognition of their tuneful talent.”

Chance

The festive character of pirate life implied that the moment of chance was a decisive one. The life of the golden age pirates has been described as “a life insecure in the extreme—one could not know what might happen even within the next few hours.” This corresponds to Nietzsche’s conviction that the “true philosopher… lives ‘unphilosophically’ and ‘unwisely,’ especially unreasonably, and feels the call and duty to engage in hundreds of experiments and temptations of life—he risks himself all the time, he plays the evil game.” He belongs to those who “love danger, war, and adventure.”

The golden age pirates’ life was a life that depended on moments of intensity, philosophically embraced in (post)modern times by Jean-François Lyotard and others. In Stephen Snelders’ words: “Nothing happened for whole days except the flowing of the seas and the passing of fish and birds. Then everything happened at once, danger and excitement soared, and a moment could make them rich or dead.” When Snelders proceeds to speak of a “veritable feast on the Wheel of Fortune,” we cannot help but recall Nietzsche asking: “Shall we not role the dice only because we might lose?” The metaphor seems particularly apt with respect to the pirates’ well-documented obsession with gambling. According to Maurice Besson, what the Caribbean buccaneers and pirates needed “were combat and assault, and when they returned, orgies and the gambling board.”

Flux

Intrinsically linked to the notion of chance is the fact that golden age pirate life was characterized by instability and insecurity, permanent change, and flux. Daniel Boting writes: “Pirate crews were… , in every sense, a floating population, in a constant state of flux, never the same size or composition from one month to another, owing allegiance to nothing and no one, neither ship, nor captain, nor cause.” Marcus Rediker adds: “Occasionally upon election of a new captain, men who favored other leadership drew up new articles and sailed away from their former mates.…Those who had experienced the claustrophobic and authoritarian world of the merchant ship cherished the freedom to separate.”

An interesting detail to consider in relation to this aspect of Caribbean pirate culture is that the buccaneers apparently gave up their names when joining the community of the Brethren of the Coast. In the words of Maurice Besson, the buccaneer’s “past was forgoten; he became a unit in a troop ceaselessly decimated and as ceaselessly renewed.” If this is true, then the proto-individualism of